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## **A CLOSER LOOK:**

### ***A Casper Case Study***

If carrying capacity is the measure of an area's ability to support an optimum population at a given level of natural resource consumption and technology, then sustainability is fundamental to preserving the area's long-term environmental integrity and renewable natural resource productivity.

Sustainability is the goal of a system of development that recognizes environmental limits and seeks to provide natural resources to support current and future generations in a way that does not damage the environment. Although sustainability now is widely recognized as a requirement of development, the means for achieving sustainability seem elusive in a world where rising human population and expanding natural resource use are inevitable.

In general terms, sustainability requires three fundamental changes. Individual behavioral changes are first. These modifications may be achieved through education and include redefining desirable family size and reducing natural resource consumption by individuals.

Second, changes in science and technology are required. Although often viewed as a panacea, technologies for sustainability likely will contribute to, not solve, our current inefficient use of natural resources and creation of waste. Technologies that mimic natural systems in their conservation of resources and interrelationships among physical, chemical and biological processes offer the best opportunities to achieve sustainability.

But most importantly, sustainability requires changes in the way we view economic, social and environmental systems and how we address them through local, state and national governments. These changes must be fair and equitable. The environment is at risk in a society in which any segment of the population is economically or socially distressed.

Traditionally, we view economic, social and environmental systems as discrete entities. Accordingly, we have designed governmental departments to address commerce, justice and

the environment, for example. Recently, we have recognized that issues as complex as conservation have economic, social and environmental components that cannot be addressed independently.

### **First Steps**

At the federal government level, the Department of Interior recently adopted an ecosystem management strategy that strongly considers the impact of regional natural resource management decisions on local economies and the quality of residents' lives. In 1993, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency launched its Demographic Change and the Environment initiative to assess the impact of demographic projections on existing environmental regulations and to help guide policy development.

At the regional level, states like Minnesota have developed strategic plans for sustainable development. Nine principles guide the Minnesota initiative. The first maintains that "progress depends on healthy social, economic and natural systems (and that) these systems are interdependent." Another asserts that "ecosystems...provide the natural functions upon which people and economies depend, (and) their carrying capacity must be considered, preserved and restored."

At the local level, small towns and big cities across the country are developing community sustainability movements. These movements derive their strength from a high level of community involvement and representation in the decision-making process. They differ from traditional community-building initiatives because they are strongly proactive and emphasize the long-term effects of the decisions that are made. They provide high levels of community ownership in decisions and rely less on mandated compliance and enhanced regulation of activities.

Although the benefits of community sustainability are easy to recognize, the processes to achieve this goal are less clear. The starting point for these processes is not always obvious and is often an obstacle. But in cities across the country, community sustainability movements are gaining momentum, crossing the threshold of community interest, and getting down to the serious work of redefining the way we want to live and work.

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**The Casper Experience**

Casper, Wyoming is cradled by the North Platte River, surrounded by arid high plains, and dominated by the rising peak of Casper Mountain. Water is a limited resource that has been undervalued and contaminated by the region's past industrial polluters. Today, this city of 50,000 is working to come to grips with its valued natural assets, its limited natural resources, the potential threats to its quality of life, and the actions that may preserve and enhance the community for many years to come.

Casper residents are bankers, real estate agents, artists, teachers, and industrial and service industry workers. They enjoy the arts, sports and a diverse range of outdoor recreation activities. They are young and old, Republicans and Democrats, and have a variety of cultural and racial backgrounds. They have a broad range of opinions about a variety of controversial topics.

Despite their diversity, they have a common need for clean air, fresh water, nutritious foods, meaningful employment opportunities, and safe places to live and raise their families. This common ground provides the foundation of Casper's interest in community sustainability.

When members of the local Izaak Walton League of America and Sierra Club chapters got together to organize the city's first community summit, one thing was clear: To begin a meaningful discussion about the future of their community and possible ways to achieve their goals and objectives, everyone with a stake in the community's future needed to be involved. Even if these people were not present at every step along the way, it was important for them to be invited and encouraged to participate.

Local organizers chose the topic of economic renewal for their first community summit. Economic renewal is especially important for Casper, which like other communities is in need of good jobs and is faced with decisions about how to develop its economy.

Some past approaches to economic problems involved recruitment of outside businesses and industries, many of which inflicted severe damage

on the local environment. Some members of the Casper business community already were dedicated to strengthening the economy by using existing local human, financial and natural resources. Others were undecided or unaware of the distinctions between quantitative and qualitative economic growth or the means through which this growth could be achieved.

The summit was designed to recognize ongoing efforts already contributing toward sustainability, to learn about other opportunities to enhance these efforts, and to begin to define directions for working toward sustainability. More than 50 local community leaders, elected government officials and conservation advocates gathered on Oct. 7, 1995, for the summit event.

### **Organizing for Action**

Promoting citizen involvement is a critical first step in beginning a community-based project. At the Casper Community Economic Renewal Summit, Larry Bohlen, chair of the Sierra Club's Community Sustainability Campaign, outlined four steps for community organizing.

First, Bohlen said, a group must reach out to involve everyone in the community who has a stake in the decisions that are reached and the action plans that are developed. Then, the group should develop a unifying mission or value statement. The next step involves a community assessment — the use of indicators, surveys or preference exercises to evaluate the current and desired characteristics of the community. Finally, the group should develop detailed action plans that provide timelines, benchmarks for tracking progress, and methods to determine the plan's success.



Casper Community Economic Renewal Summit organizers from the IWLA and Sierra Club tour Deer Creek Canyon. A reservoir is proposed near this site. Photo by B. Hren.

Results will be different in each community in which the process is implemented. However, strategies for strengthening a local economy and moving it toward sustainability may fall into one of several broad categories: investing in basic education, providing economic and business seminars and classes, developing junior entrepreneurial training and opportunities, recognizing companies that add value to local resources, and celebrating the region's quality of life through the arts and special events.

## Community Action Stories

At the Casper summit, representatives of local government, business, civic and conservation organizations were invited to share their aspirations and successes with community members.

Casper Chamber of Commerce representative Dale Bohren described his group's efforts to foster local business development. A representative of the local art museum emphasized the importance of volunteerism and special events to the city's quality of life. The president of a local conservation organization provided a reminder that sustainability in Casper would require healing past environmental damage and guiding development to prevent further degradation. Members of other organizations outlined their groups' work with land planning and green-space preservation issues.

Every community has its champions, and it is critical to recognize these individuals and organizations as a first step toward building a community sustainability initiative. The next step in the Casper community summit involved a closer examination of innovative sustainability efforts currently being undertaken in other communities around the country.

## Pathways to Economic Renewal

"Development that provides meaningful jobs for local residents, saves money and uses fewer resources goes against the conventional wisdom that says communities must grow to survive," said Michael Kinsley of the Rocky Mountain Institute. This statement is the foundation of the institute's Economic Renewal Program. The program has four basic principles designed to guide sustainable economic development.

"First," according to Kinsley, "a local community must plug the leaks." This involves looking at the way a community spends its money to provide basic food, water and energy resources. "If you get more of the necessities from within the community," Kinsley noted, "you will have more dollars to spend. . . or save and invest."



Nicolayson Art Museum representative and community champion Ken Gorder talks about his group's contributions to Casper's quality of life. Photo by B. Hren.

Towns and cities across the country are setting up local businesses that employ local people and provide basic services like health care and waste management at a lower cost. The effect, wrote Kinsley, is that "money stays in the community. It recirculates more often through the local economy and has a 'multiplier effect' that creates more value, pays more wages, finances more investments, and ultimately creates more jobs."

The second principle of economic renewal is supporting existing businesses. Kinsley noted that in urban areas, most commercial growth comes from the enhancement of existing businesses and "not from the creation of new industries." This may involve providing management training and financial resources for small business people or developing marketing plans that enable local businesses to better use the services of other local companies.

A third principle is the encouragement of new local enterprise. According to Kinsley, these new businesses should "build on local strengths and make the best use of the existing labor force, infrastructure and resources." These new businesses will play a vital role in compensating for the loss of older or failed enterprises.

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Finally, communities may find it necessary to recruit new businesses from outside the community. The most important consideration, wrote Kinsley, is that these new businesses are "compatible." New enterprises should "develop underutilized resources and meet the needs unfulfilled by existing businesses," he wrote.

Kinsley noted that these principles are intended to be used together and that communities that "pursue all four will have a competitive edge."

"Sustainability is a new way of looking at stewardship," Kinsley said. "There are no easy answers and no pat solutions. There are extraordinary opportunities in every community, and they require a collaborative approach."



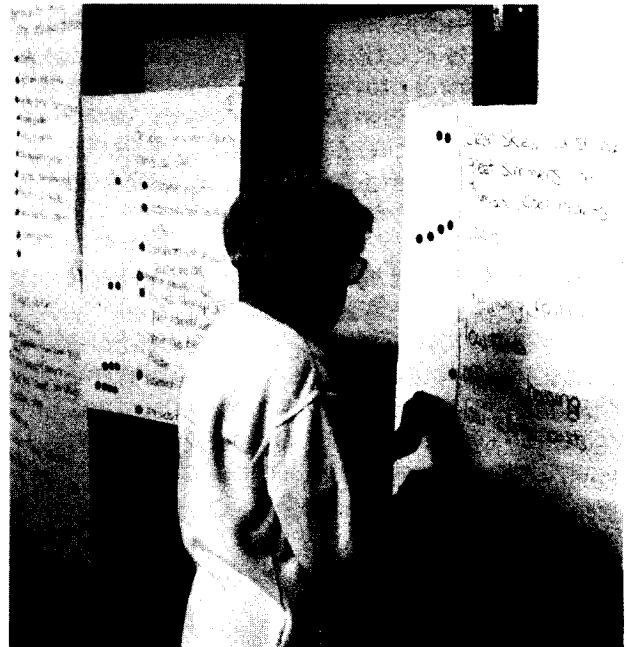
Summit participants worked in small groups to brainstorm about the actions that could be taken to protect and restore those characteristics of their community they value most. Photo by B. Hren.

## Community Voices

The first step in developing a collaborative approach to economic renewal involves bringing together a representative group of community stakeholders to describe the kind of community they hope to achieve through the sustainability process. In Casper, summit participants considered three questions designed to guide this process:

- **What are the qualities and assets of your community — past or present — that you value most and are worth protecting or restoring?**
- **What problems — current or future — threaten your community's desirable qualities and assets?**
- **What action can be taken to help address the problems or to protect and restore the characteristics you value most in your community?**

Participants were asked to generate as many responses to these questions as they could, then to rank them according to individual preference. The result is a comprehensive set of important community qualities and assets, problems and possible solutions. Another product of this process is a short list of high-priority issues and a demonstration of interest to address them.

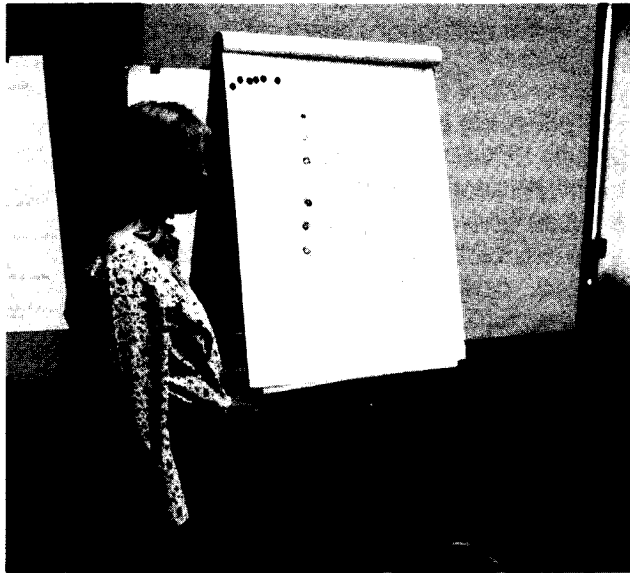


Working group participants ranked their ideas to define a short list of high priority issues. Photo by B. Hren.

Participants ranked the environment, access to cultural activities, the Platte River and its tributaries, the mountains and mountain views, and the region's small population as the most important assets of the Casper area. They identified key

problems such as poor land planning, groundwater pollution, low wages and minimal interest in the political process. Given these results, it is not surprising that the prescriptive actions ranked highest are mechanisms for enhanced community participation in land planning, environmental restoration of the industrial riverfront area, and development of a community skills and human resources directory.

The participants' most important realization was that they were not making choices that pitted the environment against economic development or social issues. Business people, civic leaders and conservationists came together and worked toward a common cause. As Tom Davis, president of the Sierra Club's North Platte Chapter explained, "We have come here today for our children. I hope that they will be able to stay here in Casper because of our efforts to promote sustainability."



Participants included local high school students. After ranking their ideas, each working group shared their results with all the participants. Photo by B. Hren.

## Beyond the Integrated Approach

Many people would argue that to achieve sustainability, the environment cannot be viewed as a competing interest with economic and social issues. In a model designed truly to promote sustainability, the environment must be viewed as the common ground on which economic and social issues interact.

This shift from a human-centered approach to sustainability will not be replaced easily with an environment-centered approach. Such an approach threatens the way we currently look at land ownership and private property rights, among many other institutional practices. But if an emphasis on people dominates our efforts, it will be difficult to achieve sustainability and promote one of its fundamental, underlying values — the importance of wildlife and natural resources.

Although we recognize that the environment is the source of our material wealth, we have not yet come to grips with the idea that all the planet's wealth is not for human consumption.

"Everything is connected," wrote conservationist Aldo Leopold. Perhaps the ultimate rule of sustainable community development is as Leopold explained: Don't throw away any of the pieces. Or in our case, don't eat, drink, burn or extract these resources to the point of depletion.

Sustainability recognizes that all life forms must be conserved to provide natural resources for the future. Values that strengthen democracy and promote human rights, respect for biodiversity, and a commitment to a high quality of life in the future all contribute to and are essential for sustainability.

Casper is just one community among hundreds across the country that has initiated discussions about how it will survive into the next century and the quality of life it will provide. Although its efforts do not represent the first time a community has gathered to discuss issues such as economic renewal and quality of life, it may be the first time people have recognized that the emerging concept of community sustainability provides a new framework in which to structure future plans and actions.

Communities also recognize that this is not the last time this process will be played out. It is another step — one that eventually may be repeated with an environment-centered focus — toward bringing sustainability closer to our reach.

